

# Jerome Denny Bright of Saxmundham, Clock and Watchmaker, Businessman and Subsequently a Cabinet-Maker and Upholsterer

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Recently the Scottish antique dealer Sebastian Pryke, who is also a member of this society, advertised an early Victorian pollard oak card table with the label of J. D. Bright & Co of Saxmundham (Figures 1, 2 and 3). Saxmundham is a small market town in East Suffolk, between Woodbridge and Southwold, which was listed with a population of just under 1,000 in 1830. This advertisement was noticed by our journal editor Stephen Jackson, who emailed the photographs of the table and what information he could find about Bright to John Stabler and myself, because of our interest in and research into East Anglian furniture, asking if we knew any more about him. This pooling of information has resulted in this article.

The *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers* lists a circular mahogany pillar table with the same label and records Bright as a watch and clock-maker. Very usefully, the dates of Jerome Bright and other biographical information have been found online, as he was the father of the Norwich School painter, Henry Bright (c. 1810–73).<sup>1</sup> The research published here seeks to clarify the entry in the *DEFM*, as there were in fact two Jerome Brights, father and son, the latter named Jerome Denny Bright.

Jerome Bright senior (1770–1846) was a watch and clock-maker in Saxmundham who also advertised, in the *Ipswich Journal* of the 6 June 1795, that he was an ironmonger who sold cutlery, brazier and tin goods. In 1790 he married Susanna Denny from the town of Aldeburgh, which is approximately seven miles south east of Saxmundham. They married at Rendlesham village, three miles south east of Saxmundham as they were nonconformists and there was a Congregational chapel there. Their son Jerome, following the old tradition, was given his mother's maiden name as his middle name. Interestingly there was a cabinet maker named Thomas Denny in Saxmundham whose household furniture and stock-in-trade was sold under a deed of assignment for creditors, listed in the *Suffolk Chronicle* of 13 June 1812, although no family connection has been found with Susanna.

Bright senior seems to have passed his business of watch and clock maker to his son Jerome Denny Bright in 1817, although continuing as an ironmonger, which he is listed as in Pigot's 1823–4 *Suffolk Directory*. He seems to have given this up by 1830 and retired in Saxmundham, where he is listed as a gentleman in Pigot's 1830 and White's 1844 directories, in the later one under his son's name. He died a wealthy man as in his will, written and proven in 1846, he left the bulk of his real estate to his son Jerome Denny as well as a personal estate of about £4,500 equally divided between four of his

<sup>1</sup> [www.saxmundham.org/aboutsax/henrybright.html](http://www.saxmundham.org/aboutsax/henrybright.html), quoting Allthorpe-Guyton (1986).

1 A pollard  
oak veneered  
card table,  
c. 1846–50,  
with the label  
of J. D. Bright,  
Saxmundham.  
*At the Sign of  
the Pelican,  
John McKenzie  
Photography*



2 The card  
table open.  
*At the Sign of  
the Pelican,  
John McKenzie  
Photography*





3 The label on the card table. *At the Sign of the Pelican, John McKenzie Photography*

children and two grandchildren.<sup>2</sup> The will also records that his younger son Henry, the artist, should reimburse his brother, Jerome Denny, £275 which he had lent him.

Jerome Denny Bright (1793–1871) has been much easier to research as he was a prolific newspaper advertiser. He was clearly a very go-ahead businessman and many of the advertisements list new products for which he acted as a local or county agent and give an excellent example of how a furniture retailing business could expand at this period by selling many of the newly mass-produced retail products. Very usefully, many of these advertisements say how long he had been in business, so he had taken over his father's business as a watch and clockmaker in 1817, at about the age of 24. He had married Mary Pratt of Needham in Norfolk in 1818. He also advertised that he wanted a youth to be an apprentice to a clock and watchmaker and jeweller, in a 'Dissenter's Family' in the *Bury & Norwich Post* on 10 February 1819. His wife Mary died in 1825 and in 1827 he re-married, his wife recorded as Jane Fuller Bright, who was probably the widow Jane Banyard. By 1831 he had added to his repertoire 'silver-smith and general dealer in the best sort of japanned goods, fine cutlery, bronze and a great variety of fancy goods and an extensive stock of cut and plain glass, china and Staffordshire ware'.<sup>3</sup> Pigot's *Directory* of 1830 also lists him as an engraver and a fire office agent.

There had been a complete change of trades by 1840 as in an advertisement in the *Suffolk Chronicle*, he described himself as a 'cabinet, chair maker and upholsterer &c', and was advertising 'the new patent cocoa-nut fibre for stuffing mattresses and couches and for all kinds of furniture', adding that he was the agent for it for the eastern

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Suffolk Chronicle*, 8 January 1831.

division of Suffolk.<sup>4</sup> This change of trades may have come about as Charles Sawyer (c. 1769–1853), the only cabinet maker listed in Saxmundham in Pigot's 1830 *Directory*, had in 1837 a large two-day auction sale, 'reducing his very extensive stock in consequence of family arrangement'.<sup>5</sup> Sawyer was then aged about 68 was probably retiring from the business, that he had been running with his two sons, Charles and William. Charles had opened a cabinet and upholstery shop in Southwold and William was to take over the Saxmundham business from his father. Bright most probably saw this as a very good opportunity to take up these trades and change the direction of his business. Pigot's 1830 *Directory* lists Bright along with two other clock and watch makers in Saxmundham. With the advent of specialist, almost factory made clock and watch movements, they were probably just retailers and repairers in what was becoming a much more competitive market. As an example of this, a mahogany cased wall clock, the dial signed J. D. Bright, Saxmundham, has been sold recently. This had a movement made by Thwaites and Reed, the London wholesale clock makers, with their serial number dating it to 1834.<sup>6</sup>

Bright had already begun to diversify into selling household goods and at a period of rising wealth for much of the population, there was an increasing demand for items to furnish and enhance the home, items that were themselves becoming cheaper to produce. Clock and watch making were never again mentioned in Bright's advertisements or trade directory entries. In the 1841 Census, he is listed as a cabinetmaker and his son Alfred, aged sixteen, is listed as an upholsterer, presumably an apprentice. He also had Jerome Woolerton, a journeyman watchmaker, aged 24, living in his house. Woolerton, however, is listed in White's 1844 *Directory* as a watchmaker and book-seller with his own business.

In 1842 Bright again branched out with another new opportunity in the newly discovered art of photography. He advertised that he was opening a 'Photographic Portrait Establishment' in Berners Street, Ipswich, 'having purchased the exclusive rights under Beard's patent for the County of Suffolk'.<sup>7</sup> Daguerre had given his first public demonstration of the daguerreotype in France in August 1839 and the sole patent rights for England and Wales had been purchased by Richard Beard in 1841. To run this establishment Bright had an experienced artist from the Royal Polytechnic Institution. It is clear from the advertisement that he had already set up a photographic studio at his own establishment in Saxmundham. The great expense of these businesses no doubt justified the cost of £2 2s 0d for a full-length portrait in a case or frame and £1 1s 0d for a bust portrait.

He again advertised in 1842 as a cabinet and chair manufacturer, upholsterer and paper hanger, who was selling 'Patent Felt Victoria Carpets', Palmer's Patent Lamps and Candles, and purified Argand Oil, for both of which he was the sole agent.<sup>8</sup> In 1840 Charles Sawyer junior, the cabinet maker and upholsterer in Southwold, died

<sup>4</sup> *Suffolk Chronicle*, 8 January 1840

<sup>5</sup> *Ipswich Journal*, 1 July 1837.

<sup>6</sup> [www.antiques-atlas.com/coveclocks/browse.php?code=rcoo6a293](http://www.antiques-atlas.com/coveclocks/browse.php?code=rcoo6a293)

<sup>7</sup> *Suffolk Chronicle*, 19 November 1842.

<sup>8</sup> *Suffolk Chronicle*, 3 December 1842.



and in 1846 his brother William Sawyer, who had taken over their father's Saxmundham business also died and there was a two-day auction sale of the entire new furniture, stock-in-trade, tools and household furniture and effects.<sup>9</sup> With the inheritance from his father and the business opportunity this opened-up — as Whites 1844 *Directory* lists only one other cabinet maker, Robert Packman in Saxmundham — this may well have led to the further expansion of Bright's business. An advertisement appeared in the *Suffolk Chronicle* of 16 May 1846, offering to sell licences for the payment of a small annual sum for the rights to take Daguerreotype portraits, for any town or district in Suffolk, by applying to the patentee R. Beard or J. D. Bright in Saxmundham. This may have been a way for Bright to move out of photography to concentrate on enlarging the cabinet and upholstery business. At some time, probably late in 1846, he took his two sons-in-law into the business, the brothers Isaac and James Ashford. Isaac Ashford (1821–99) had married Mary Pratt Bright in 1845 and James Ashford (1823 – post 1901) married Harriet Bright in 1847. They came from the village of Badingham, approximately six miles from Saxmundham. They were also from a dissenter family, probably with a farming background, but I have not been able to establish if they had any furniture making training before they became partners in the business. This partnership saw the name changed to J. D. Bright & Co, which is the name on the label on the pollard oak card table. It was not until this partnership had taken place that any advertisements appear for journeymen. In 1848 they asked for two cabinet makers, one a carver, to work for J. D. Bright & Co.<sup>10</sup>

Bright may originally have been a retail cabinet maker buying in some or all the furniture that he was selling. There were various wholesale furniture making businesses just supplying retail furniture businesses, who would still called themselves cabinet-makers and upholsterers. The large London firm of William Smee & Sons in Moorfields even issued large comprehensive illustrated catalogues of furniture that these retailers could buy from. John Stabler has pointed out some design features in the Smee's catalogue which appear on the card table and a rosewood games table also with the Bright's label formerly at Benacre Hall, Suffolk. This games table has a design feature that Smee & Sons often used, which is the shaped and carved frieze on the upper section and which they called a lappet frieze (Figure 4). These catalogues could of course be copied by other cabinet makers to help in the design of their own furniture. There were also wholesalers in East Anglia; the 'Dictionary of Norfolk Furniture Makers' records the firm of William Perkins in King's Lynn, who advertised in 1839 for cabinet-makers, turners and carvers to work in his wholesale manufactory.<sup>11</sup>

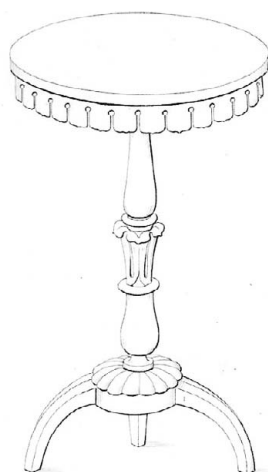
The dissolving of the partnership of J. D. Bright & Co., was advertised in both the *Ipswich Journal* and *Suffolk Chronicle* of 9 February 1850. This was so that J. D. Bright could leave the business to be run by his sons-in-law under the name of Isaac & James Ashford, as cabinet-makers, upholsterers, paper hangers, undertakers and general furnishers. The notice stated that the firm had been run as J. D. Bright &

<sup>9</sup> Beard and Gilbert (1986), p. 786; *Ipswich Journal*, 28 March 1846.

<sup>10</sup> *Suffolk Chronicle*, 2 December 1848.

<sup>11</sup> Stabler (2006), p. 196.

4 William Smee & Sons,  
*Designs of Furniture*,  
 1840s, round coffee table  
 with lappet frieze below  
 the top, page 61.



Co. for the last three years. Bright asked for a continuance of the same patronage for his successors and the Ashfords stated that Mr Bright would continue to reside in Saxmundham, and had kindly offered to assist them with his advice and experience. There was a large list of all the different furniture, upholstery and other household products which they sold. Jerome Denny Bright and his family moved out of the family home and business, leaving it for the Ashfords and lived at Park Lodge in South Entrance, Saxmundham.

The firm seems to have been very successful and continued to advertise for journeymen, requiring cabinet makers and upholsterers, including a cabinet maker who understood paperhanging, in the *Suffolk Chronicle* of 24 September 1859. The 1861 census listed Isaac Ashford as employing fifteen men and two girls. The firm continued into the twentieth century under the same name being run by the family as furnishers, still selling many of the same household products, as well as being antique dealers. They continued in the same premises that Jerome Bright senior had originally used, which by that time was called Ashford House. The business finally closed around 1983, with the premises now occupied by Flick & Sons, estate agents and auctioneers.

In 2000 a customer of mine purchased lot 323, listed as a William IV period rosewood games table, at the Sotheby's auction sale of the contents of Benacre Hall, approximately sixteen miles from Saxmundham. Although not listed in the catalogue entry, this table had the same label as that on the pollard oak card table. Very interestingly three other lots from this sale had the label of I. & J. Ashford. Within a distinctively later nineteenth-century border, this label echoed Bright's previous one: 'From I. & J. ASHFORD'S / CABINET, CHAIR, / AND / UPHOLSTERY MANUFACTORY / SAXMUNDHAM, / SUFFOLK'. The lots bearing it were:

Lot 25 A buttoned upholstered Chesterfield sofa, c. 1880,

Lot 29 A pair of giltwood footstools in the Louis XV style (lot 28 was a very similar pair of giltwood armchairs in the same faded crimson floral damask, although not listed as being labelled), and

Lot 38 A set of twelve ivory painted and parcel-gilt armchairs, c. 1770.

There were also pieces catalogued as being supplied with the label of the Norwich firm of Freeman, cabinet makers, upholsterers, carvers and gilders, including lot 50, a pair of mid-nineteenth century giltwood low chairs. There was also a group of gilt frames on certain Old Master paintings which were supplied by Freeman's. Incidentally at this time the firm of Freeman was managed by William Freeman's two sons, William Philip Barnes and Charles Jeremiah. William Philip Barnes Freeman was also one of the Norwich School of artists and a close friend of the artist Henry Bright, brother of Jerome Denny Bright. Much of the correspondence between the two artist friends survives.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> [www.saxmundham.org/aboutsax/henrybright.html](http://www.saxmundham.org/aboutsax/henrybright.html)

